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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, March 30, 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "FOOD-SHOPPERS' NEWS." Information from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, and the Consumers' Counsel, Agricultural Adjustment Administration.

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News for the spring food-shopper today begins with asparagus and strawberries.

Early in March the first carlot shipment of California asparagus reached the city markets. California produces about a fifth of the yearly supplies of this vegetable and most of the early crop. This year the number of California acres planted to asparagus is slightly larger than last year. April is usually the month when California asparagus comes on the market in largest quantities and is lowest in price. But asparagus season runs through July and the lowest prices in cities near late-producing areas come in May or June. White asparagus is milder in flavor than green asparagus. They cut white asparagus when the growing spear first breaks through the ground but the green kind they cut after the stalk is about 6 or 7 inches above ground.

As you probably know, asparagus will not lie around and wait patiently. It ages rapidly after cutting. So make sure the asparagus you buy is fresh. You can tell whether stalks are fresh and tender by seeing whether they are brittle and have close compact tips.

Now about strawberries. Louisiana strawberries are coming on the market these days and in a few days volume shipments will be coming to market from Louisiana. About a fifth of the strawberries sold in the market each year comes from the early-producing States. The crop from Louisiana is more than half of the early total. Most of the early crop ripens in March and April. This year it will probably be about a sixth larger than last year. Growers in Louisiana plan this year to ship only those berries good enough to have a grade of U. S. No. 1. Production estimates for States shipping in May and June are not ready yet but it looks as if we would have more berries than last year because more acres are planted to them. The seasonal low point in strawberry prices usually comes in May.

Now about meat supplies and prices. Retail meat prices appear to be at -- or close to -- their low point for the first half of '38. As you know, meat prices generally have dropped about 20 percent since last fall, have returned to the price-levels of late '34 and early '35. During the 6 months ending in mid-February, prices of beefsteaks and fresh pork tumbled 14 cents a pound, about double the drop in smoked pork products and beef roasts, and almost 3 times the drop in lamb.

3/30/38

Fresh pork prices probably will go up slightly in April and then go down slightly. For lamb a larger price upswing is in prospect. Lamb prices generally are highest from May to July when supplies are seasonally small and when mostly spring lambs are on the market. Beef prices may go still lower, but any drop will be small probably compared with the large drop since October last.

Late April is the time when the first spring lambs of the 1938 crop will probably reach the markets. These early lambs are fattened mainly on mother's milk and are slaughtered when they are anywhere from 3 to 5 months old. The crop of spring lambs this year will be about a sixth larger than last year's small crop, and those sold up to the first of July will probably be larger than a year ago and better in quality. Right now most lamb on the market is grain-fed meat. Supplies of it will continue to be larger than at this time last spring.

From now until the last of September the number of hogs slaughtered will probably be larger than a year ago. Most of the increase will come after April. Right now is the season when fewer hogs are slaughtered. This will probably be the case this year until fall pigs start to market in late April or early May.

What about butter and eggs? The predictions are for more butter and prices continuing at their present level. Because of favorable weather and cheap feed, more milk was produced during February. March first marked a high point in milk production at that date since 1933. The wholesale price of butter with a score of 92 in New York has remained at 30 and a half cents a pound since the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation began buying butter for relief distribution in mid-February. Butter prices usually go down during the first half of the year and hit bottom in June.

Egg prices appear to be at or close to their low point for the year. In spite of a record low in the number of layers in farm flocks, more eggs have been laid than were laid a year ago. The hens have simply been heavy producers this year. Egg prices usually reach their seasonal low point in April but this year the sharp drops in prices have brought the low point earlier.

Orange and apple prices probably will continue lower than a year ago and will not go up as much as they usually do during the first half of the year. Apple supplies at this time of year come from storage. Cold storage apple holdings on March the first were the largest on record for this date and almost two-thirds as large as last year. As for oranges, we also have many more of them than we had last year at this time. In mid-February orange prices hit a new record low. They were selling in the retail stores at 24 cents a dozen -- about half as much as their price last August. As you probably know, oranges on hand at this season are either California Navels or Florida oranges.
